

David Lewis

**Opening Statement to the Board Meeting, Remaking Cities Institute, Pittsburgh
16 October 2009**

Good morning.

We are meeting as the Board of the RCI at a time that is at once difficult and opportune. Cities nationally and internationally need our help more than ever before. We have a lot of work to do.

In the United States wars have sapped our economic strength. Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan. And let us not forget the Cold War. Gone are the days when rebuilding the downtowns of our cities with gleaming towers of steel and glass was the language of international corporate power and aspiration. Gone are the days when highways radiated the nirvanas of suburban office and residential expansion into precious farmland, leaving behind in our inner cities the poor and the segregated.

We are entering a time when the tide is turning. Our cities are no longer expanding, but are shrinking. We are entering a time, not of building but of rebuilding; not of invention but of retention; not of expansion but of consolidation, not of arrogantly replacing the old with the new, but of perceiving that the character of the old lies, not in its physical or economic decay, but in the language that heritage has to teach us, and that the roots of heritage are culturally as well as physically deep in all of us.

We are learning that there is a difference between history and tradition -- that history focuses on the past, while tradition is the bridge between what we inherit and where we are going. Tradition is a language that exists in all of us. It is not a mistake that the downtowns of our major cities are gradually becoming towns again. A generation ago their buildings emptied out at five o'clock, and downtown streets were deserted. Today these streets are gradually becoming lined with shops and restaurants, and with residential and cultural facilities, where you will find life once again at all hours.

It is not a mistake that in our inner city neighborhoods we are seeing citizen groups forming whose goal is to rebuild their communities from within, with urban designs based on restating inherited urban languages. Nor is it a mistake that suburbanites who used to rely on SUVs and suburban malls are now calling for infill and density, and pedestrian oriented main streets that echo traditional towns and urban communities.

These are trends. We still have a long way to go. But they are directions in which our cities are moving.

At the same time cities in other parts of the world are undergoing different changes. Provincial cities in China, powered by industrial growth, are expanding to huge and unforeseen sizes as unskilled rural populations migrate in search of work. The threats these burgeoning cities pose to agricultural sustainability, air and water pollution, and irreversible environmental damage are incalculable.

In other parts of the world, in Africa, the continent I come from, in India, and in Latin America, older cities are surrounded by ever-growing shanty towns and favellas, where unemployment, disease, lack of services, drugs and crime proliferate, based on hopelessness.

The Remaking Cities Institute cannot aspire to cure these problems. But what we can do is to be a clearing house where these problems can be discussed and understood. At the core of the RCI there will be a growing computerized data bank where the best solutions from cities at home and abroad can be evaluated and debated. We can learn from these cities, and they can learn from us.

We firmly believe that at the core of every major urban issue there are microcosms of change. There are situations and actions that are at once small enough to be defined and understood, but potent enough to influence and effectuate major urban evolutions.

When urban design in the United States began fifty years ago, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, we enfranchised citizens in open public meetings and challenged them to set their own goals and to develop strategies to implement them. The idea caught on. Interdisciplinary teams, serving urban communities all across the United State and in several European countries, are now commonplace. The Remaking Cities Institute was founded twenty years ago in the wake of the downturn of nineteenth centuries industries, particularly steel, not only in the United States but in Europe as well. One vigorous off-shoot was Yorkshire Forward in Britain, and we are happy to have its spark-plug, Alan Simpson, with us today. Another offshoot was the Prince of Wales Institute in London. The RCI now has working relationships with Oxford University, Glasgow University and ITESM in Mexico. These relationships are our lifeblood and they must be fostered.

Here at Carnegie Mellon we have the Urban Laboratory, the pioneer in the undergraduate and graduate teaching of hands-on urban design in the nation, and you will hear about these in a moment.

At the nerve-center of these programs is the empowerment of citizens to carry out their plans and strategies. In many of our inner city communities citizens are realizing that their historic churches, libraries, schools, parks, sequences of “pattern book” houses, and traditional main streets represent an inheritance of real capital value. We demonstrate to know how make revitalization economically viable. Both in terms of marketability and in terms of generating jobs and careers.

At Federal and State levels it may well be that we need some sort of Marshall Plan as part of our “stimulus”, a fund from which communities can borrow to implement their plans and to pay back the capital over an agreed period of time from increased property values, business investment and employment revenues. This is the sort of comprehensive agenda I would like to see the RCI research, and to create and monitor test case situations.

I deeply believe that the kind of local empowerment I am referring to here is not only essential for our inner city communities, but might also be role models for African shanty towns and Latin American favellas.

One of the prime reasons for our Board meetings is for you to come up with initiatives that you would like to see the RCI undertake, or case studies that you can contribute to the RCI. In times of change like now the urban needs “out there” are great. We have much to do. Let’s go for it. Thank you.